

FFO: A THEOLOGY FROM THE PEOPLE

by Rev. Jennie Boyd Bull, 1985

"The Holy Spirit works best in groups." That's a sentence I have used and reused over the years from Board meetings, to rap groups, to General Conferences, to the Faith, Fellowship, and Order Commission. It is an exciting and challenging task to chair a commission that is doing theology in a new way, letting the Holy Spirit work in us as a group.

In my work with the National Council of Churches (U.S.A.) Faith and Order Commission, I am repeatedly overwhelmed with differences in style, and the newness and importance of what MCC is doing theologically:

- we are NOT leaving theology to seminary professors or even to clergy.
- we are NOT primarily coming from church tradition, or Biblical interpretation.
- we are NOT formulating beautiful statements and trying to get everyone to agree with them.

What we ARE doing is living out the original hope that FFO first stated in its questions, "What is theology" (FFO's Six Questions, 1976): "Every person is a theologian... Theology is thinking about God and our relationship to God... It is reflection on the human experience in relationship with the Ultimate... The way theology is done and worded is always changing."

Above all, FFO is a PROCESS of helping everyone in UFMCC learn how to do theology together:

- we ARE focusing on laity and clergy doing theology together.
- we ARE primarily coming from our experience, and reflecting on that experience in light of scripture and tradition.
- we ARE asking questions, and together seeking answers.

For many years my dream has been that our theologizing would be based in local churches and in our districts, with our Fellowship-level work simply reflecting and supporting that grass-roots theologizing. I especially see our districts growing in strength as centers for educational resources, places of dialogue. More and more, our District Conferences and retreats are becoming times of learning together, or sharing our resources. FFO's process is designed to assist in that growth. Since our 1981 mandate to develop study questions for a Christian theology of sexuality, FFO has been developing a process of:

- lay and clergy representation and networking within each district and extension area.
- workshops offered at the district, area, and local levels, not only to gather information, but to help people explore theological issues together in empowering ways, trying to "depoliticize" our theology.
- training laity and clergy in communication and group leadership skills, providing resources for growth and study.

The unspoken assumption behind all of this is that for too many years church leaders thought they knew what people's spiritual questions and struggles were. But they didn't, and they spent hours of talk and reams of paper addressing irrelevant or peripheral or exclusive questions. As gays and lesbians, we are acutely aware of how



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often we are "talked about", instead of being asked what our concerns are. that is why FFO spent the past three years gathering questions, trying to find out from ALL of us what WE want to know about sexuality as Christians. The resulting over 2000 questions, from all the districts and extension areas, were then carefully melded into the eight questions being proposed to General Conference 1985 for future study. Our assumption is that is the diversity of FFO's representation, by geography, theological tradition, training, gender, race, etc. can learn to communicate creatively, can learn to hear through one another's vocabularies of faith to the One God and One Spirit and One Christ of whom we speak, then surely our whole Fellowship can.

The eight questions for study are:

- (1) What is sexuality?
- (2) What is spirituality?
- (3) How are God and sexuality connected?
- (4) What does the Bible reveal about sexuality?
- (5) How do spirituality and sexuality affect our attitudes and behaviours toward God, self, and neighbor?
- (6) What is sexual healing?
- (7) How does the Church (congregation, UFMCC, Church Universal) relate to sexuality in mission, worship, sacraments, and rites?
- (8) What relationship is there between sexuality and spirituality?

Along the way in our process we are learning some important lessons for all us:

-- Vocabulary is essential. If we use different words for the same things, or the same words with different meaning, then we need to hear that so we can understand each other more fully. This is a basic ecumenical task for our entire Fellowship and also essential in vocabularies related to our sexuality and across cultural differences. That is why we offer workshops focused on helping each other hear the words we speak.

-- Sharing Our Stories is essential. The more we get to know each other, share our experiences, the more we can understand one another. This takes time, takes relaxed and informal settings, takes risking, means Roberts Rules and agendas don't always work, and means our faith comes from our experience.

-- Scripture and Worship are common bonds, roots, and resources that unite us with our God and with each other. They make our theologizing real and give embodiment to our stories.

-- Joy is essential. If theology isn't fun at some level, isn't based in praise and in Good News, then something is wrong with the theology. That is why we are going slowly, not pushing ourselves with too many meetings (only one a year), taking time out to play at meetings, affirm each other, and not move faster than we (of UFMCC) can grow.

-- Flexibility is essential to address the variety of concerns that arise within UFMCC. For example, at our January 1985 meeting FFO representatives drafted a statement on "AIDS and God's Judgment", requested by the Board of Elders as part of our overall Fellowship response to the AIDS crisis. This flexibility means openness, means that changes can be made, that new ideas must be heard. God taught me that lesson early in my time as chair of FFO. At our first meeting in 1981 I came in with a neat program of study on the Apostles Creed, and within half an hour, WE were refocusing on

workshops about spirituality and sexuality. As I said, "The Holy Spirit works best in groups."

-- Ecumenical Involvement is essential. The World Council of Churches statement Baptism, Eucharist, and Ministry is an ecumenical consensus that is a true gift expressing the diversity already present in UFMCC and giving us a mirror in which to see our reflection. (One happy reflection is that we are more inclusive of women and laity and more open in God-language than much of the Church.) Joseph Gilbert of FFO has developed a 1985 Lenten Study series based on this document, to encourage grass-roots education about our ecumenical roots and provide feedback and comment to the World Council from UFMCC. You see, one there is a structure for representation, with yearly meetings for discussion, once there is a possibility for several working groups, once there are the educational and distribution resources of Samaritan, we can with authenticity hear what our people's concerns are, provide resources and contexts for discussion and growth, and relate that discussion to the wider church context, not only within UFMCC, but also within the Consultation on Church Union, the National Council of Churches, and the World Council of Churches.

MCC's faith and order work has much to offer the "Faith and Order" work in the wider ecumenical movement. (It is no accident that our commission includes the word "Fellowship" in our faith and order commission; community is essential to our process.) We are there at ecumenical meetings to support the inclusion of women and people of color and our theological concerns. We are there to raise issues of sexuality. We are there to witness that MCC already is a "post denominational" church with much strength in its ecumenical diversity.

Sometimes people ask me, "But what about the experts?" Well, we have asked various friends of MCC and trained people within MCC to comment on our process and our questions, and we will continue to do so. We have "working papers" for our meetings, into which various representatives and others put time and energy to give us a focus for our discussion. Samaritan College and Extended Studies have always attended our meetings and provided input, including a bibliography of resources, written and living.

So, what about the future? FFO's goal is to continue to apply this process to questions, workshops, resources, and networking to the eight study questions as adopted at General Conference 1985. For 1985-87 we propose looking at the first two questions, "What is sexuality?" and "What is spirituality?", and we are designing workshops, resources and more to look at these questions.

We are on a JOURNEY as a people, and unless over the long haul we in UFMCC can learn to talk with each other about God in our lives, in our sexuality, we will be a scattered and conflict-ridden people.

